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MELASIA AND THE BEAR



In a meadow, by a grove, stood a Cossack's apiary. Is it possible that you may not know what an apiary is? Of course you do! More than likely you've all tasted its honey at one time or another...

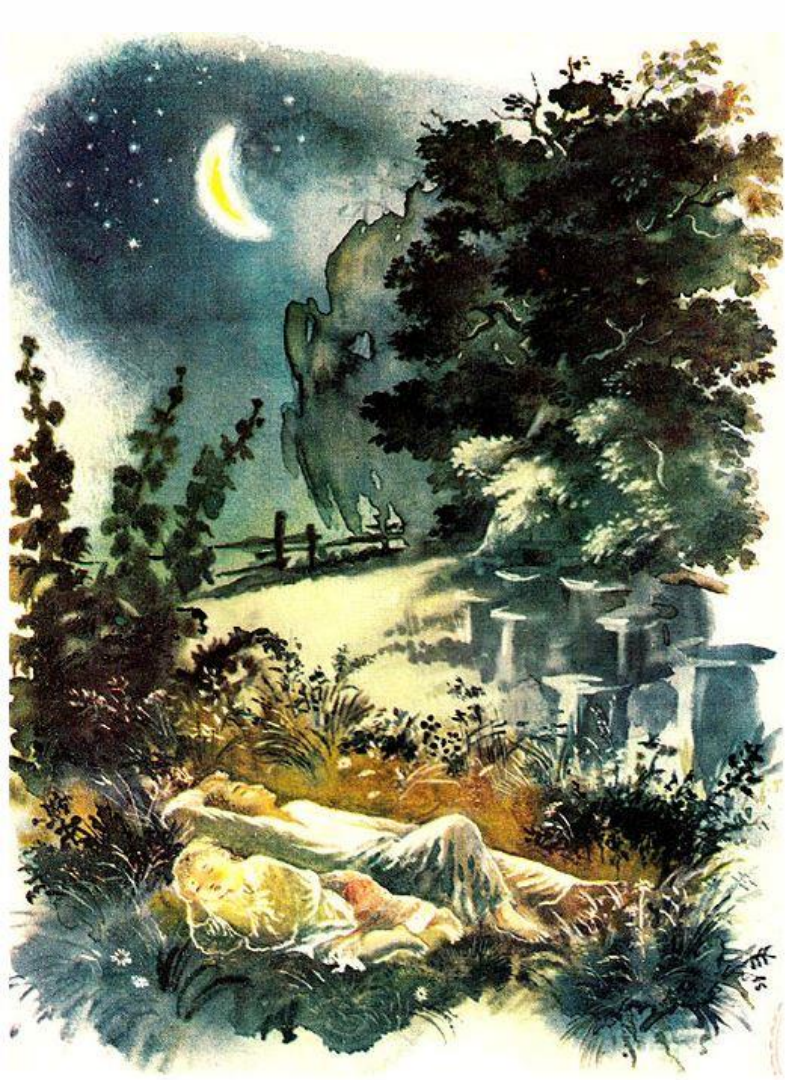
This particular apiary was enclosed by a forest of vines, and here, within this enclosure, the old Cossack had barricaded all of seven tall, ancient and deep-rooted oak trees, and an eighth, a broad, leafy willow. Anyone who saw the willow always wanted to know how it had grown there, all by itself, among those solid oaks...

...What a beautiful spot, that apiary! One couldn't seem to get enough of breathing there! The air was so light — so free! Wherever one looked one was surrounded by broad fields, dotted here and there with giant oaks standing like scattered tents against the sun. A roadway curved its way into the village, but the village itself couldn't be seen over the hill — all that could be seen in the rays of the rising sun was the dark, heavy line of forest.

For Mikhailo, spending the summer among the beehives with Grandpa was wonderful. And little Melasia, Mikhailo's sister, tiny as a knot, fair-haired and barefoot, followed Grandpa around, played house in his apiary humming little tunes, or wandered about the meadow picking strawberries... Melasia was out of bed earlier than anyone else in the morning, and was the last one in bed at night, because pottering around Grandpa's household kept her so busy, you've no idea!



Now one evening, Mikhailo, all tired out, was lying in the grass looking up at the sky. He was dressed in a wide-sleeved shirt and outsize "sharavari" held up by a red embroidered sash. The stars had already come out and the tiny sickle of a new moon was shining above the oak as if hung on one of its knotted branches. Melasia, also tired, was beside him, lying still for a moment, then sitting up, dreaming, then asking questions about why Grandpa wasn't home yet. And no wonder, for time went on and he still hadn't appeared — not even on the horizon.



Grandpa had gone into the village that evening and for some reason lingered there. It was quite dark, the stars were all out, the moon had risen quite high, Mikhailo fell asleep, and still no Grandpa! There was not a sound — all was quiet! But suddenly there was a deep rumble from the direction of the grove and something heavy approached the apiary. So huge it was — so huge — that you couldn't even weigh it on a scale! Closer and closer — it brought the vine fence down and threshed about among the beehives — knocking them over — tramped over the flowers, the hollyhocks and guelder-rose bushes, bumped into the big oak tree as it passed — God in heaven! Can you imagine what it was? A terrifying shaggy, huge bear had come a-visiting!

What was Melasia to do? Her drowsiness fled like a startled bird, her hands clasped together in horror and fright. What a terrifying, frightening guest! There was no help! Dear brother Mikhailo! How was she to save him?

Mikhailo continued to sleep sweetly by the door of the shed, when he was awakened by small trembling hands and arms that wound themselves about him as firmly as a hop vine, while a tiny voice whispered "Mikhailo, my brother, dear brother!"

"What is it?" he asked, sleepily, without opening his eyes.

"Please come, brother! Please, please come into the stable, because I'm frightened here all by myself. Come brother, please come!"

The tiny hands tugged at his sleeping body with all their might; the hot, frightened tears fell freely; the tiny heart, faithful and loving, fluttered against him, as she dragged him a couple of steps into the stable, where he fell thoughtlessly into the hay, fast asleep. He didn't hear how the small hands, trembling and exhausted, tried to raise him, nor did he hear the quiet, bitter tears.

In the meantime, the bear, like a master of the house, continued to blunder about, seeking the better beehive, the sweeter honey, and as soon as he found it, immediately sticking his big paw into its sweetness, hauling it out and licking at it greedily.

"Oh dear, oh God! If only Mikhailo wouldn't wake up, but go on sleeping! If only he would! What would happen if he woke up? He wouldn't listen to her, so small, but would go straight out to the bear... Oh God! The Bear was going to eat her right away — right away!

"But would she be enough for him? If only she would be enough so he wouldn't touch brother... Yes, let him eat her — then he wouldn't eat Mikhailo!"

The little hands clasped tighter together, the tears flowed more freely.

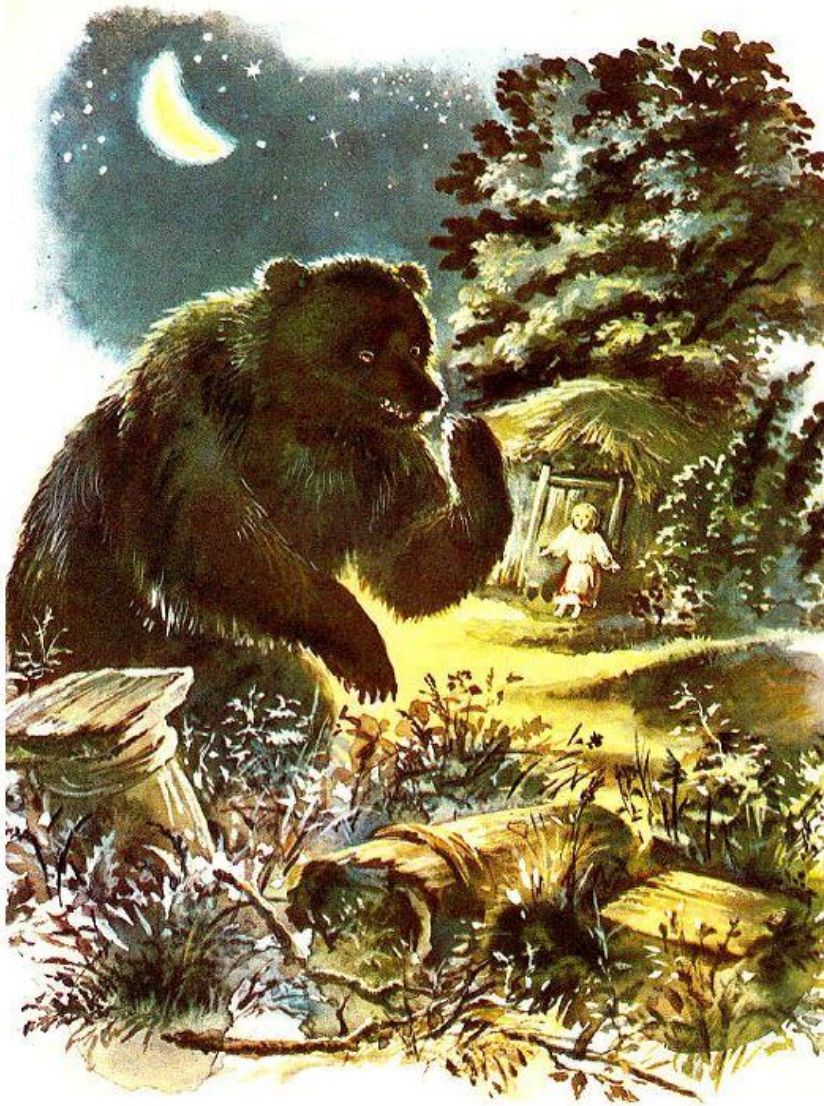
In the meantime the terrible, sweet-toothed, shaggy destroyer was taking his time about cleaning up the honey — pausing from time to time to look up at the sickle of the new moon above as if to say approvingly "Yes, moon, you are lighting my way here very nicely," then, as if listening, "Yes, it seems to me that a little girl is crying somewhere near"...

Oh, what misery! It would seem that a tiny heart would have shattered itself to pieces after beating so hard for so long!

When the bear grunted, she waited for him to roar... But no, he laid himself out on the ground, the heedless shaggy creature, and rolled and wallowed about in the grass.

The tiny hands again tugged at the sleeping brother, almost breaking with the effort, and pulled him into the shed just enough to close the door on him.

"What's happening? What is it?" the Cossack lad woke up suddenly, maybe even a little frightened, as he tried to open the door. "Open up! What's wrong?"



"Nothing dear brother, it's me, me!" answered a tiny voice.

"Open the door, Melasia!" cried Mikhailo again.

"I don't want to have to break it down!" And he shook the door on its hinges.

"No Mikhailo!" answered the little girl. "No brother!" And looking fearfully around she saw that the bear was up on its hind legs, listening, as if lying in wait for her, and then as if laughing at her fright, showed his white teeth in a growl.

"Let me out, let me out, Melasia!" shouted Mikhailo, and with a mighty heave pushed the door open. Melasia fell like a small sheaf of wheat from against the door as the bear again showed his teeth...

Here there arose such an outcry — so loud, so piercing, so ringing, that Mikhailo, surprised, shied back, and the bear, alarmed, scuttled rapidly toward the grove, the ground shaking beneath his thudding feet... When Mikhailo finally gathered his wits about him, picked up his little sister and asked what it was all about, there was nothing to be seen or heard, though they both stood rigidly still, holding their breath, their arms wrapped around each other. All was quiet. The moon shone and the stars continued to twinkle.

"Tell me, Melasia, tell me the whole story from the beginning. What happened?" Mikhailo asked.

"No, no, I can't! I'm still scared!" sobbed Melasia.

"What a fraidy-cat you are, sister!" Mikhailo laughed.



"Oh-oh, oh-oh!" Melasia clung closer to her brother, like to some treasure that had been found or rescued.

The moon was really high and the stars had paled when they heard a cossack song, like a broken bell or musical string in the distance, and saw a human figure approaching — it was their grandfather. They rushed forward to meet him and laughed, saying "Aha, you got lonely without your old Grandad, eh? You weren't able to sleep, eh? Well, youngsters, I couldn't get away, I just couldn't. Met an old friend and we got to talking"...

And the old man again began to sing a Cossack song.

When we were Cossacks on the sea.

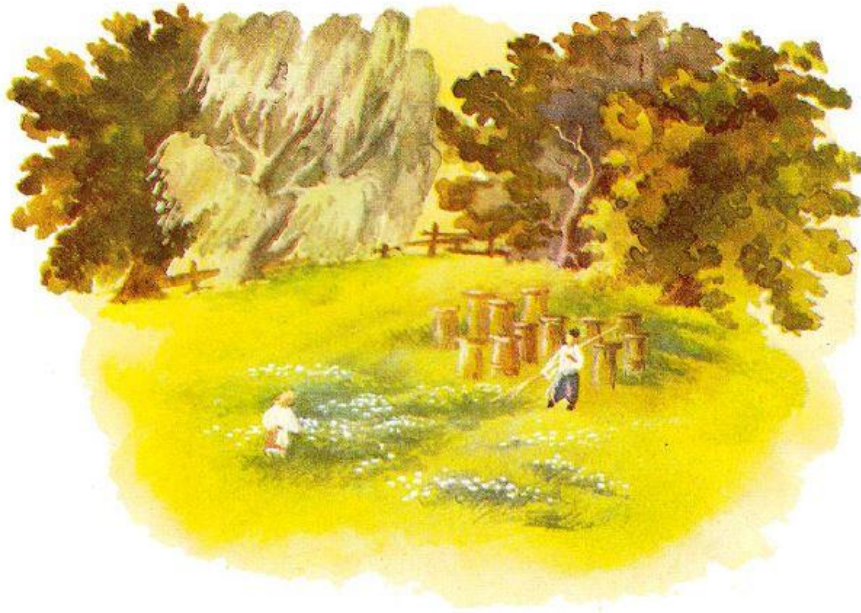
When we were Cossacks on the steppe...

"Grandpa, Grandpa!" Melasia interrupted him. "There was a bear here!"

"Yes, Grandpa", said Mikhailo, "Melasia insists that there was a bear in the apiary... I was sound asleep when she pulled and pushed me into the shed, closed the door on me and frightened me out of my wits... I kept shouting, "let me out!" and she wouldn't. I had to break down the door. As soon as I jumped out she raised such a hullabaloo that I couldn't think or see anything for the noise. When I came to my senses there she was, lying on the ground, nobody else around, the beehives upturned, the grass trampled, the bushes crushed... She swears that there was a bear here."

Grandpa continued to hum and smile till Mikhailo said the beehives were upset and the bushes crushed, when he said "ha!" and rushed toward, the apiary.

"May you never see another beehive or have another mouthful of honey in your life, you wicked, shaggy, beast!" fumed the old Cossack, picking up the hives and putting them right-side up. "What a mess you've made, and look at the damage you've done!" Mikhailo, helping his grandfather, advised that they should get a good gun in case he came again, and in his imagination saw himself aiming it at the terrible beast with great pleasure. Little Melasia followed them both about, retelling for the tenth time how it had all happened and how the bear had trampled and overturned, how he had rolled in the grass and gnashed his teeth, how he licked at the honey, and how he had come closer... and closer... and closer... Her eyes shone brighter than the stars above, which were beginning to fade with the coming dawn — and sure enough the horizon was brightening with the rising sun.



"Well, Melasia? You're a little girl after my own heart!" said Grandpa then, pulling her into his arms and stroking her tired little face. "You're a real Cossack! Imagine, such a little chick having the courage to try and defend her brother against a bear's teeth! Isn't it a marvel, that such a weak little girl could frighten and chase away a terrible bear?"

Well, Melasia didn't think it was so marvellous, for after all didn't she dearly love her brother — why wouldn't she try to save him? And yet, Melasia did perhaps feel that it was a happy marvel, for whenever anyone mentioned it later, she blushed rosily and even, perhaps, bragged a little...

"Melasia, little sister, when will it be my turn to defend you?" asked Mikhailo occasionally, looking around eagerly for something frightening or difficult, so that he could show his courage. "When can I save you from danger?"

And Mikhailo would go to bed, dreaming of the time when, maybe, the bear would again show up.

He'd wake up at night, listening hard, looking at the gun he had bought himself — but unfortunately, the bear never did come again.

And here's where my story ends — what happened later, I don't know and I cannot tell you more, not knowing. So I hope you'll pardon me while I bid you farewell and good health!